

PRESS BRIEFING

**Charles P. Ries, U.S. Ambassador to Greece
Press Briefing**

**January 13, 2006
U.S. Embassy Athens
Athens, Greece**

AMBASSADOR CHARLES RIES:

Χρόνια πολλά και καλή χρονιά to everybody. I'm two days back in the country. Glad to be back. It's so much better here than it is to the north. I was just saying to Elizabeth as we were walking over, the great thing about winter in Greece is that there's good light. As the rest of [inaudible] in northern Europe, it's dark and gloomy all day long. The light in Greece is spectacular.

Maybe I should just start and these statements will come in, if you're all ready. Let me just say that I wanted to talk to you today, I wanted to talk to everybody in any case at the beginning of my second year in Greece, but that the international community finds itself today and yesterday responding to the situation in Iran – it's really quite a very serious situation – and we, as the Greek government, as the so-called EU3 of France, Germany and Britain, made a statement yesterday reacting to the decision by Iran on Monday to break the seals of the uranium enrichment facility at Natanz and resume uranium enrichment in contravention of its commitment to the EU3 of September 2003, its commitments under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the so-called NPT, and to turn its back on the efforts to find a way for Iran to meet its asserted goals in terms of developing peaceful nuclear energy. The United States worked with the three leading members of the EU and the rest of the international community on this and we have given this process really quite a bit of scope to proceed. What I wanted to stress to you, and you'll see the statements by the EU3 and of course by Secretary Rice, which I encourage everyone to read and to absorb, what this means is that the IAEA in Vienna will meet next week probably, at some early time in emergency session to make a decision, and it's more likely than not that the reaction of the members of the Board of Governors would be to refer the matter to the UN Security Council. This is something that is called for in the Treaty, and has been anticipated since last September, as may be necessary. This does not represent the end of the diplomatic process. The UN Security Council is part of the diplomatic process, and the response of the international community is consistent with a focus on diplomatic means and diplomatic motives to try and finish these concerns that the international community has with these activities.

So let me stop there. I'll take your questions on that or on other issues that you might have that I could help you out on.

Yes.

Q: Do you see in the future military action against Iran?

A: I think that that's only speculative. I think that we are still pretty much engaged in the diplomatic process and the UN Security Council has many options. I don't think that you should infer that, at this point.

Yes.

Q: [inaudible] Pakistan, Israel and India are allowed to have nuclear weapons. Why is Iran not allowed to have them? Could you explain that

A: Well, the signatories to the Non-Proliferation Treaty make a commitment not to develop nuclear weapons, and that treaty is what Iran is violating.

Q: So, if Iran says that it withdraws from the treaty?

A: Well, that would be also quite a terrible problem. The regime in Iran is a regime that has recently called for the destruction of another sovereign state and is supporting terrorists and acting in a manner that isn't consistent with the peace and security of other states in the international community. And so it's a particularly serious situation for international stability, for Greece's interests, for Europe's interests should Iran acquire nuclear weapons.

Anything else on this? Yes.

Q: On another subject?

A: Anything else on Iran? Yes.

Q: So if all these diplomatic efforts fail, military action is possible?

A: We still have a lot of diplomatic efforts to do. The focus now is to continue the diplomatic process which goes to the Security Council next.

Back on Iran?

Q: The Secretary of State yesterday didn't mention anything about sanctions. Today the French foreign ministry said that this is rather premature. So what is the position of the United States on sanctions?

A: The position of the United States is that we want to discuss the matter with our allies and all the members of the IAEA Board of Governors first, and then should the Board of Governors refer it to the UN Security Council, we will discuss what we think the UN Security Council should do, and among the options that the Security Council would have would be sanctions. But the United States wants to approach this in a cooperative manner with our friends, our allies and other members of the international community.

Yes.

Q: Do you see eye-to-eye with all EU members on the issue?

A: I think so. Anyone else? Yes.

Q: [inaudible] Iran is not Iraq. [inaudible] ... How can we persuade Greeks that Iran is really a danger to Greece? Don't forget that Greece has a serious role in the Security Council and the...

A: Indeed, indeed. I certainly don't forget that. I think that it's not for me to state Greece's position. It's for Greece to state Greece's position and the Foreign Ministry put out a very good statement yesterday, and I would refer you to that. Greece does play a very important role. It is not only a member of the UN Security Council for a period of two years, it is also a member of the IAEA Board of Governors which will be coming together in the near future. I think it is important to be clear about this: this is not anything aimed at the people of Iran. Iran is a very vibrant, strong country. It is a country where unfortunately the people of Iran don't have the ability to participate in decisions or take part in this part of Iran's interaction with the international community. As I mentioned, the new President of Iran recently called for the destruction of another sovereign state, which is not a position quite consistent with peace and stability in the world. But it's up to Greece to decide Greece's own viewpoint with respect to these positions. I think that it could clearly be destabilizing in the region, in the Middle East, in the Mediterranean writ large, if a large country with the kind of international foreign policy perspectives that Iran has, its support of Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic jihad, should have nuclear weapons. I think that would be destabilizing as a policy matter. And there's also the question of the credibility of the international legal system. If you believe in multi-lateralism, if you believe in the supremacy of the UN system, as I believe we all do, for one country to say that its international obligations don't count and to undertake a covert program for a period – a number of years – and to turn its back on the efforts of the international community to work out an accommodation, to work out an arrangement, I think that that's a serious matter.

So, other topics? Yes.

Q: Recently for some time we have the stories of Pakistanis being arrested [inaudible]. What I wanted to ask is, do you have any information, or do you have any worries that maybe in Greece we have cells of, or we are in danger of having cells in the form of Al'Qaeda or, relatively, that sort of type... I am talking of Muslim extremism. Because we do have quite a big number of Muslims from different nations, different kinds of Muslims, and, according to your information, should we worry about something like that?

A: Well, I think that it's important that we be vigilant. There are sadly enough in today's world this network of networks – it's almost described as a franchise operation of terrorist groups that choose to conduct a religious war, a war against Western interests, in particular the United States, and undertake suicide bombings, undertake assassinations and other kinds of terrorist activities. We did have, and it's been reported in the Greek press, some intelligence that we passed to the Greek authorities related specifically, possibly, to an attack in Greece, and the authorities undertook to investigate that. We were not directly involved in the investigation, and we are confident that the

Greek Government and the Ministry of Public Order in the tradition in which we have had very close cooperation with them here in Greece, is undertaking to do everything it can to ensure the safety of the personnel of this embassy, our facilities, and personnel of other embassies or other possible targets. It's a sad manifestation of the present state of the world, but it is a responsibility that the Greek Government has undertaken in a very thorough manner. With respect to the events of the summer, all I know about them is what I read in papers.

Q: I was not referring to specific events, I was talking the broader picture.

A: Right. Every American embassy is vigilant these days against terrorists or Islamic extremists. I remember the days when embassies were a much more open and welcoming place, and in many respects, I think that all of us regret that those days have passed, but it's our responsibility to take care, to protect the people that work for us and their families.

Yes.

Q: I would like to make a bit more specific the question. Are you worried about sleeping cells of terrorism in Greece or our region? ... Or non-sleeping cells?

A: (Laughter) Well, obviously that's part of being vigilant. I mean, what are you vigilant against? You're vigilant against someone taking an unexpected, unprovoked attack against American interests, against Western interests here in Greece or in any other country in the world. Yes, indeed, our policy is to be worried about that kind of thing and be on it.

Q: Is there anything that we can do to counter them, those sleeping cells?

A: Well, I think that what you do is you try to have better border controls. You try to have better intelligence. You try to increase the physical security of facilities. You try to increase the personal security of individuals and you try to do what you can where you have evidence to take people that are violating the law into custody and to make cases against them. The United States has done all those things in different places at different times on different bases.

Yes.

Q: A follow-up question on this. There has been some reports published also on the Greek newspapers the last few days having to do with the terrorist attack in London saying that Greece could be, or is one of the station countries that groups working together with those terrorists in London have been using in the past, such as France, Spain, I remember, and Germany.

A: There's nothing I can say to specifically confirm that one way or another. Obviously the terrorist attacks in the London underground in July were horrible. Having lived in London I can well appreciate how disruptive and how cruel these bombs were, how many people were injured. If any of us have any information that has a bearing on who planned it, who supported it, who financed it, I'm sure that it's important that we provide that in order to make a case against the remainders of the cell that undertook the attacks or so that these people can properly be prosecuted or convicted, and

also to learn the lessons we can so as to make less likely a repeat, wherever, whether in London, Paris or anywhere else.

Yes.

Q: There is the [inaudible] that when there is evidence [inaudible] people should be taken to custody. Does the United States feel that there might be evidence against people that are not in custody at this moment in Greece?

A: That there are people against which evidence exists that are not in custody? Not that I know of. I don't follow each and every case, each and every piece of evidence, but I don't think so. Anybody else on terrorism? Yes.

Q: How do you deal with those reports that charge that in the Souda Base CIA are detaining either Iraqi prisoners or other suspects?

A: The Souda Base is a Greek base, it is not an American base. U.S. forces are present at Souda Bay with the permission and under the authority of the Greek base Commander and consistent with the bilateral defense agreement that we have with Greece. There are no detention facilities on that base. We conduct all of our activities on that base with the full agreement and [inaudible] of the base Commander, who is ultimately in charge. But there is nothing to this story. There are no such facilities or people.

Yes.

Q: A kind of more personal question. I remember the last month you have been talking about different issues having to do with the life in Greece, social, political, economic life, and those sayings of yours have caused specific reactions, some of them very strong, some of them against you personally. I wanted to ask you whether you are reconsidering your role as an Ambassador, as a personality in Greece after all that happened.

A: (Laughter) I appreciate that in public life, everything you do gets subjected to analysis, and I welcome that, and I'm having a wonderful time. Being an ambassador is a great honor, to be an ambassador of your country anywhere, and it's a particular honor, and great pleasure to be ambassador in this country. I enjoy every day I'm in Greece. When I was in the United States last month, I thought fondly of what was going on here, and many days wished that I were back. People have been extremely welcoming to me. I recognize that journalists have a job to do and politicians have positions to take. I don't, personally, consider my role as one that is as perhaps as big as you do. I am only the representative of my country and I try to do the best I can in that. I don't wish to interfere in politics. I have good friends on both side – on all sides – of the political spectrum here and consider it part of my role to be in touch with all parts of Greece, but I am supposed to be an observer of Greek politics, not a participant. With respect to the United States and Greece, I do believe that my role is to push the relationship in a positive direction, to build cooperation and to help us find things we can do together to make the world a better and safer place, and I'll continue to do that.

Yes.

Q: I understand you had lunch with the Foreign Minister yesterday. Since you just met with the Prime Minister just a few weeks ago, what was that about?

A: Yes, I did.

Q: What was that about?

A: You know, I welcome the opportunity to explain it again. I asked to see the Prime Minister before I went back to Washington in order that I could take his views on all the pending issues back to Washington when I was back for a conference of American ambassadors, and to quote him, which I was interested in doing, and I think that was very much in Greece's interest. One of the roles of an ambassador is to convey Greek attitudes and Greek mentalities and Greek interest and positions back to your government, and that's what I was doing. With respect to the Foreign Minister yesterday, I am very grateful that he invited me to have lunch with him, and I was delighted to do so, and I told him what I had learned in Washington and we had a general chat. In neither case was the purpose of either of those meetings to be one of pressure. This is normal diplomatic activity. This is what ambassadors do; they see political leaders, intellectual leaders, businessmen and so forth and try and advance their objectives.

Anybody else? Yes.

Q: [inaudible] How do you plan to fight anti-Americanism in the Greek public opinion?

A: That's very much of a worrisome thing for me. And I guess you can't fight anti-Americanism. What you try to do is try and explain the perspectives of your country; you try and be open – be, if you will, American – and hopefully over time and with greater understanding in both directions, and with the maturing of the relationship, we can get to the point where people decide less as a reflex that the Americans are crazy or the Americans are a danger to the world. I'm sure you know many people who have studied in the United States, and understand that we have a very open political culture. Everything about American policy is known. Washington is an extremely open, combative place, in many ways like Athens in that respect. Policies are hammered out. There are no hidden agendas. What we stand for is what we are doing. The President's efforts in the present international politics are designed to expand the scope of democracy and freedom, what he calls the "Freedom Agenda to the World," and we are doing that for ideological reasons, in that we think that freedom is the best guarantee for human development and also leads to greater peace and stability in the sense when you've got democratic systems, a great Greek invention, that the stresses and strains of life can be worked out in a democratic context, and then countries are less of a risk to each other. And, all I can do is try to explain that in a context, and to the extent that people understand that these policies are not a threat to the rest of the world and are not undermining stability or not undermining the interests of our friends and allies in Europe, I think anti-Americanism (inaudible). I don't attack anti-Americanism; you can't really attack anti-Americanism. You can try to gain greater understanding for what it is that we're doing.

I have to say that I don't find a lot of anti-Americanism. I find people skeptical of why it is the United States does things; if we can talk about them, we can understand it better. But Greeks, to me, have been extremely supportive and positive, and the people of this country like to travel to the United States, many people have relatives in the United States, many people have lived in the United States, gone to school in the United States, and I think that's all good. And the United States has played a big role in Greece for well over a century. There's some major institutions here that are supported with American philanthropic charitable contributions – the American Farm School, the American School of Classical Studies, Deree and Anatolia Colleges – and those are part of what I call the underlying ties, the enduring ties between our two countries, and I think that they also are part of what makes the relationship special.

Can I get one last question? Yes.

Q: [inaudible]... Greeks in the future will not require visas?

A: I hope so. But as a practical matter, we are not quite in a position politically and bureaucratically to undertake a new enlargement of the visa waiver program. But one condition, one criteria for participation in the visa waiver program has been the adoption of the high-tech biometric passport which Greece has just done this month, and that's a very good thing. And certainly Greece should be a very good candidate when the process is reopened. Right now, we're consulting with Congress about the reopening of the program, so for the immediate future, we don't have anything to announce on that, but I hope that in the future we can do so.

Last one, back there.

Q: Secretary Rice is planning to visit Turkey sometime next month. It is, I think, her second visit to Turkey. Is anyone planning to visit Greece at any time?

A: (Laughter) Well, I hope to get the Secretary here soon. The Secretary has not announced a trip to Turkey. There has been speculation to that effect in the Turkish press. I know the Secretary is interested in coming here and would like to arrange that as soon as possible.

Thank you very much.

###